

GAMES

FAQ

Q What advantages do multiple monitors have when playing games?

A Using multiple monitors for games is a great idea and all modern 3D graphics cards have two outputs. You get a more immersive feel by using the monitors side by side in a widescreen array, or alternatively display the game world from two distinct angles. Microsoft's Flight Simulator series uses the former to give a larger cockpit view, while Supreme Commander (see Top 5 Games, right) uses the latter to let you view multiple areas of the battlefield at the same time.

Unfortunately, support for multiple monitors is usually on a game-by-game basis and is sometimes implemented only in a later patch. Get the latest patch for your game, and check the graphics options to see if it's supported. The best alternative is the Matrox TripleHead2Go, an external hardware device that takes a D-sub or DVI input and splits the signal across up to three monitors. It works with a wide range of games. For more details, visit www.matrox.com.

Seth Barton

Notebooks, video and games expert

seth@computershopper.co.uk



THQ

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl

★★

£22 inc VAT

Your job as a S.T.A.L.K.E.R. (which stands for Scavengers, Trespassers, Adventurers, Loners, Killers, Explorers and Robbers) is to scour the Chernobyl exclusion area looking for artefacts to sell, while fighting off other scavengers and even the military. There are worse dangers to fall foul of, however, such as invisible super-human mutants created by being exposed to large doses of radiation.

As this game has been delayed since 2001, we were expecting it to be well polished. Unfortunately, we were wrong. For a start, it's incredibly hard and too easy to die. You begin the game with a pistol, which sounds alright, until you discover that it takes at least six shots to kill anything. Your opponents have a range of weaponry that kills you far quicker. You can steal weapons from anyone you've killed but, while they had infinite ammo in life, looting a corpse rarely rewards you with more than 30 bullets. Picking up a second machine gun gives you more ammo, but you also pick up the gun itself, and these quickly clog your inventory. At one point, we were carrying about 40 pistols.

Pick up too much and you'll become so over-encumbered that you can't move. Unloading yourself is slow and frustrating, as the unresponsive inventory means it usually takes a couple of attempts to drop each item. You most often get encumbered during a fire fight when desperately trying to pick up extra bullets, but accessing the inventory doesn't pause the game, so you tend to get killed while you're trying to get your kit organised.

Movement is handled equally badly; a small energy bar depletes slowly with strenuous tasks such



▲ Radiation most definitely wouldn't create creatures like this one

as running and, not realistically, jumping. Jump too much and you'll be told you are too exhausted to walk. This is the perfect cue for your enemies to pump their infinite supply of ammunition into your static form.

The game is supposed to let you wander freely through the exclusion zone, but stray too far from the next mission and you'll be killed by a radiation storm. While undertaking unofficial missions and making money by selling kit you've picked up, the game is not as flexible as we'd like. Oblivion set the standard for flexible game play, but S.T.A.L.K.E.R. comes nowhere near. The official missions are samey and can be badly handled. In the first mission, if you retrieve the stolen flash drive before killing all the enemies, the game gets so confused that it refuses to tell you what to do next. By the time you reach the ridiculous invisible mutants, you'll be so bored of dying repeatedly that you'll

probably just give up altogether.

The graphics, bar the horrendously out-of-date and difficult-to-use menu system, look quite impressive. The grass blowing in the wind and lighting effects are particularly good. However, this all feels like polish to us. Scratch away the surface and you'll soon see this game for the disappointment it is.

David Ludlow

SUMMARY

- ✓ Looks good
- ✗ Too easy to die
- ✗ Losing energy stops you walking

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 512MB RAM, 10GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B0000DG2T3
SUPPLIER www.dvd.co.uk
DETAILS www.stalker-videogame.com

Top 5 games

1. Supreme Commander

£25 inc VAT ★★★★★



This RTS has the biggest battles ever seen on a PC. There's a vast range of units to command and the graphics are slick, but you'll need a powerful PC to run it smoothly.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.supremecommander.com FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



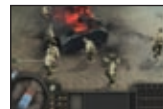
2. Company of Heroes

£15 inc VAT ★★★★★



This game looks fantastic, from the historically accurate units to the bombed-out French towns. But it's the innovative gameplay that makes it the best RTS around.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.thq.com FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



3. FIFA 2007

£25 inc VAT ★★★★★



The fully licensed teams and slick presentation have always been welcome, but FIFA 2007 is easier to play than its predecessor. Arguably, the best football game around.

SUPPLIER www.gameplay.com DETAILS <http://fifa07.ea.com> FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



4. FlatOut 2

£12 inc VAT ★★★★★



FlatOut 2 includes outrageous crashes that let you send your driver through the windscreen and into the road. It's also a brilliant racing game.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.flatoutgame.com FULL REVIEW Oct 2006



5. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

£13 inc VAT ★★★★★



The most stunning role-playing game we've ever played. It looks amazing, and there's so much to it you could play it for a month and still have loads left to do.

SUPPLIER www.gameplay.com DETAILS www.elderscrolls.com FULL REVIEW Jul 2006





▲ Your otherwise enjoyable training in Sahrani is blighted by the invasion of communists

505 GAMES Arma: Armed Assault

★★

£18 inc VAT

Arma isn't a standard first-person shooter. You don't have a health meter, taking a bullet or two will kill you, and you're pretty much a goner without the help of your squad mates. This is a military simulation and must be approached appropriately. You often have to trek for miles between combat zones, and combat is usually carried out at long range against enemies who are little more than specks on the horizon.

The game is set on the fictional island of Sahrani, which is split in two, with a constitutional monarchy in the south and a communist regime in the north. You are a US Army soldier stationed on the island for training purposes. However, your exercises are cut short when the northern regime invades the south.

The game is split into missions. Every mission has a number of objectives, but it's up to you how you complete them. You can sneak in at the dead of night and blow up the enemy's armour with satchel charges, or steal a tank and go on the rampage. With so much choice and so much space, Arma gives you an almost unprecedented feeling of freedom.

Unfortunately, the game is blighted by being far too hard. Some of the missions would faze John Rambo, such as when you have to fight off a whole tank platoon with nothing but a rocket launcher. Your squad mates are grunts of little brain and, while they can shoot straight, they're partial to a bit of friendly fire when handling heavy weapons. Finally, the appalling driving AI will drive you up the wall as you wait for the rest of your convoy to stop crashing into trees and catch you up.

Arma: Armed Assault is an ambitious game, but it feels unfinished and it's too difficult to play for us to recommend.

Chris Finnamore

SUMMARY

- ✓ Enormous play area
- ✗ Poor friendly AI
- ✗ Too difficult

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows 2000/XP, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 3GB disk space, Pixel Shader 2.0-compatible graphics card
PRODUCT CODE B000MMY71Y
SUPPLIER www.play.com
DETAILS www.armedassault.com



▲ When Veronica kept winning, Chuck decided chess wasn't a good choice for a first date

EA The Sims: Life Stories

★★★★

£25 inc VAT

There are now five major expansion packs available for the Sims 2, each one expanding the range of activities available to your Sim. However, this release is the first in a new range of standalone games and isn't compatible with The Sims 2 or its expansions. The clean break has allowed EA to make a couple of useful revisions to the game and provide a new way into the franchise.

Life Stories uses the same excellent graphics engine as The Sims 2. Thankfully, EA has succeeded in significantly reducing the minimum specifications. Unlike The Sims 2, it will run on most PCs and notebooks. Some compromises have had to be made, with the number of Sims per household, range of objects and house plot sizes all reduced.

In Life Stories you take responsibility for a single Sim and help guide them through a number of key events in their lives. First, you play the story of Riley, a young woman who returns to her home town with romance in mind. By successfully navigating her first big date, you unlock the story of Vince, a rich entrepreneur who has been unlucky in love.

The stories take the form of a linear set of tasks that advance the plot. Both work well to introduce new players to the wide range of activities on offer in the Sims, and several amusing twists and turns keep you interested throughout. Alternatively, you can use the free-play mode to create your own Sim and play out their life without interference.

If you haven't played the Sims 2 and want a gentle introduction to the game, this would be ideal, especially if you want to run it on a notebook with integrated graphics. The stories remove some of the flexibility that made The Sims 2 so enjoyable, though, so for long-term fans of the series there's not enough here to make Life Stories worth your time or money.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Runs smoothly on lower-spec PCs
- ✗ Limited household size
- ✗ Nothing new for long-term fans

SIMULATION Requires Windows XP or later, 1.4GHz processor, 256MB RAM, 3.5GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B000M2XL8Y
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.thesimstories.co.uk



▲ Flood the level with alien goo and your enemies will be slowed down and vulnerable

CODEMASTERS Maelstrom

★★★★

£20 inc VAT

This real-time strategy game is spoilt by the programmers saving all the best bits until last.

The first half of its single-player campaign steals clumsily from a dozen similar titles, without introducing a single new idea of its own. This is largely due to the faction that takes centre stage: a guerrilla group called The Remnant. The plot around this group is uninteresting and stereotyped, and the cut scenes are responsible for some truly terrible dialogue. The gameplay's not much better, following the tired old cycle of build base, collect resources and construct tanks.

It would be a shame if you gave up here, though, because inventiveness rears its head in the second half of the campaign mode. The two other races, the transforming Ascension and the amphibious alien Hai-Genti, are much more interesting. Flooding huge swathes of the earth, hatching monsters from eggs and turning planes into robots are all great fun.

We'd recommend skipping the campaigns entirely and jumping straight into a skirmish match against AI opponents or online players instead. That way, you can play as the interesting factions straightaway and you won't be forced to sit through endless, awkward cut scenes as you do so.

Other problems make Maelstrom frustrating to play, though. Unit path-finding is all over the place and you'll often have to steer a stuck tank manually away from a small wall. The interface is a bit of a mess, too. It restricts the number of units you can select at once, hampering big battles.

That the charming madness of the Ascension and Hai-Genti forces manages to shine through despite all this is quite an achievement. Perhaps with more time and without the depressingly ordinary Remnant, this could have been a great, though silly, strategy game. As it stands, it's just a passably interesting one.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Over-the-top destruction
- ✓ Sparks of ingenuity
- ✗ Mostly a mish-mash of old ideas

STRATEGY GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.4GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 4.5GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B000GLISA0
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.codemasters.co.uk/maelstrom